

Records Retention & Management

Overview of Importance of Records

- After a disaster, proving what is mine becomes essential to rebuilding individual lives. In many disasters—a courthouse fire or a tornado destroying a city hall, for instance—the *official* copy maintained by the government is lost. But property owners generally have copies of deeds, mortgages, and other ownership documents in their own possession, so they have some measure of protection. The widespread devastation experienced during floods and hurricanes demonstrated that losses can compound quickly. Situations have emerged in which both the official record was lost when the courthouse was destroyed and the personal copies were lost when homes were washed away, leaving individuals and families with no proof of ownership. This suggests that our traditional planning for disasters has been faulty, in that we have rarely envisioned such a scenario. We also need to think about property records more broadly. We tend to focus on deeds and mortgages and property maps, but proving what is mine may involve other types of records: probate records and wills may prove an inheritance; divorce settlements may include property distributions; school records prove what is mine by attainment. People care about what is theirs, and records are key to proving ownership.
- Protection of records is important and can be achieved with quick action.

Overview of Damage Assessment in Current Disaster

- An accurate assessment is difficult to compile. The Department of Cultural Affairs has utilized available processes (conference calls, email, personal calls) to assess damages to cultural resources including records.
 - Government Records - Many impacts are not reported to DCA
 - By law, State Archives does not have a local government records program
 - We have provided advice to cities and counties through advisory records retention guidelines – completed in association with ISAC and League of Cities
 - We learned of impacts in County Courthouses – mainly through a long-standing cooperative microfilming project (GSU/SHSI/County Officials)
 - County Records
 - Clerk of Court Records
 - State Records technically
 - Under jurisdiction of State Court Administrator
 - Concerns for recovery of records of historical value
 - Some counties had records in basements and were flooded
 - Some sought advice on recovery (freeze, freeze-dry, recover)
 - Some enlisted help of recovery organizations – service bureaus

- Some determined records were not recoverable and destroyed them
- Some determined the cost would be too high and destroyed them
- City Records
 - Often not reported – esp. smaller communities
 - Records are often not backed-up
 - Recovery in some cases was not deemed feasible
 - Some assumed records were not recoverable
- Records in Museum, Libraries and Historical Organizations
 - Most understood the value of the records
 - We had better reporting information on damages
 - More likely to take steps to protect records (freeze, freeze-dry, recover)
- State Records
 - State Archives does not have a good handle on operating records in agency field offices – they are controlled and managed by the agencies, not the Archives
 - Records in the State Archives are generally well protected – environmentally secure, above the 500 year flood plain
 - Provided security sandbag barrier at vulnerable entrances to State Historical Building
 - Records in the State Records Center are stored in a warehouse in the flood plain
 - Non-current, non-permanent but needed records
 - Worked to provide clearance of about 48 inches in the warehouse
 - Relocated approximately 25,000 cubic feet of records prior to expected flood event

Lessons from Previous Natural Disasters (1993 Flood & 2006 Iowa City Tornado)

- Natural disasters require quick action to salvage records & artifacts
- However, analysis and inspection of historic properties needs to wait longer – water must go down before analysis and inspection is possible
- Recovery and rebuilding is a long process... we must keep in mind that it will involve a multi-year effort and necessitate a multi-year source of funds (multi-year appropriate with non-reversion)
- Technical assistance is imperative and we need greater resources to provide adequate service
- Once sources of funds are available, need to streamline the process for awarding funds (deploy funds quickly); however, we must recognize that some will not be ready for funds immediately (multi-year funding commitment is needed)

Best Practices & Thoughts for Discussion

- Good, effective, well-administered Records Management Program is essential for effective disaster preparation.
 - Records Retention schedules need to be developed
 - Records can be and must be destroyed when appropriate
 - Records that have long-term value need to be identified and protected
 - The program must be in place and used to be an effective disaster mitigation tool

- Vital or Essential Records need to be identified and protected in advance of a disaster
 - Records have different values – Essential Records are not necessarily permanently valuable
 - Need to know what is needed for continuity of government operations (COOP)
 - Records management programs are a valuable tool for COOP purposes
 - Iowa needs to participate in and support efforts at the national level to provide emergency preparedness training to cultural organizations and records keepers – efforts such as the Intergovernmental Preparedness for Essential Records (IPER) project of the Council of State Archivists; the COSTEP project, is a planning tool designed to bring together cultural resource institutions with emergency management agencies and first responders; and similar programs in the nation,
- Emergency Management Offices at State, County and Local levels need to know about records protection and records values
 - Emergency Managers will not know of the value of records unless we as records keepers work with them
 - As with all a cultural assets, it is incumbent upon record custodians to work with the emergency management offices to make records values known
- In the event of disaster, quick response is essential
 - Usually a 48 hour window to freeze wet records before mold and mildew sets in
 - Freeze and then freeze-dry records before determine what to recover
 - This is only the first step
 - Need to clean, analyze, sort and review materials to know what was recovered and what needs to be saved – that decision needs to cover after the initial step of freeze-drying records
 - Records retention schedules are essential and need to be in place before a disaster to be of help
 - If all non-required records have been destroyed, the records storage area will be clean, and the stored records will have known values
 - Identification of Vital or Essential Records as part of a records management program allows for appropriate duplication and preservation of those records so they can be recovered.
- Knowledge of what records have been duplicated and where those records are maintained is essential
 - Duplication may be by microfilm or electronic
 - Records need to be separated – duplicates from the originals—to be safe
 - Electronic records need to be backed-up, migrated, checked for integrity and maintained in order to be secure and useful as a disaster back-up
 - Digitization of records, by itself, is not a preservation tool but it is a good and effective tool for a records management program